

Jerusalem Post, April 16, 2009

Israel said that the newest version of the draft text for next week's anti-racism conference released Wednesday in Geneva was worse than the previous one when it came to singling out Israel.

"The new text is not an improvement. If anything it is worse than the previous text because it includes a reference to foreign occupation which in the diplomatic world is code for Israel," Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva Roni Leshno Yaar told The Jerusalem Post by phone.

In addition, he said, in its opening paragraph the new text continued to reaffirm the conclusions of the 2001 United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance that met in Durban, South Africa. That text singled out Israel.

"We are worse off than we were yesterday," Leshno Yaar added.

Israel, the United States, Canada and Italy have all said they plan to boycott next week's event, which is a follow-up conference to 2001, and which has been dubbed Durban II.

Israel and the US walked out of that 2001 meeting to protest its virulent anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish atmosphere.

The US has held firm to its intention to boycott the 2009 meeting as well, but said that it would consider changing its position on Durban II if significant changes were made to the text.

In a statement it released Monday, it said, "The United States believes any viable text must...

not reaffirm in toto the flawed 2001 Durban Declaration and Program of action."

In addition to dropping the affirmation of the "flawed" 2001 program, the US is also concerned by "restrictions on freedom of expression" stemming from the document's language on inciting religious hatred.

In spite of the US stance, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay welcomed the new 17-page text, which reaffirms Durban I and is a revision of a "rolling text" published by the chair of the conference's working group, Russian diplomat Yuri Boychenko, on March 17.

He expressed his hope that the new version, based on extensive consultations with various countries, would meet the concerns of all delegations and could be adopted by consensus.

Pillay on Wednesday urged all states to take part in the conference.

"Lives are at stake", Pillay told the assembled delegates at the Preparatory Committee meeting.

"The future and hope of countless victims of racism lie in your hands. Eight years on [from the 2001 conference], anti-racism pledges and measures have not yet succeeded in relegating discriminatory practices and intolerance to the heap of history's repugnant debris," said Pillay.

"The goals set out in the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action have not been achieved. This reality should prompt us to seek common grounds to move the struggle against racism forward. The tools and capacity for achieving the goals outlined in the Declaration and Programme of Action are within reach if we remain committed to those objectives."

US representatives could not be immediately reached for comment on the new text, but on Tuesday the Obama administration reiterated its intention to boycott the conference.

Senior Obama administration officials spoke by phone with leaders of the Jewish community Tuesday to reassure them that the document revisions were not sufficient to induce the US to attend Durban II.

In a statement released close to midnight on Monday, the administration explained that "elements of the current draft text that continue to pose significant concerns" remain.

While the administration officials on the off-the-record conference call with Jewish groups made it clear that problems with the document remain, the US has publicly emphasized its willingness to reengage in the Durban process if its conditions are met.

State Department acting spokesman Robert Wood's statement Monday concluded, "We hope that these remaining concerns will be addressed, so that the United States can reengage the conference process with the hope of arriving at a conference document that we can support."

In anticipation of the State Department statement, and amid lingering concerns that the US would participate in the Geneva meeting, several Jewish groups and members of Congress on Monday called on the Obama administration to refuse to attend.

"The latest conference working group draft statement is still fundamentally unacceptable. The very first clause reaffirms the hate-filled declarations of the 2001 Durban Conference, which singled out only one country in the world for condemnation - Israel," Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Illinois) and Shelley Berkley (D-Nevada) wrote in a letter to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Already in advance of Durban II, a two-day anti-Israel NGO conference is scheduled to meet on April 18 and 19th, called "The Israel Review Conference." An anti-Israel rally is also scheduled in Geneva for April 18.